



Cover Supervision

Guidance on when and how it should be used

Background to cover supervision

The National Agreement on Raising Standards and Tackling Workload (2003) included a provision that teachers' contracts would be changed to limit the amount of cover that they provided for absent colleagues. The agreement also allowed for a limited number of support staff roles to provide cover. Subsequently, 'rarely cover' guidance was introduced in 2009 to ensure that teacher cover was minimised.

Recent governments have weakened, revoked or archived some of the guidance and regulations produced to help schools implement the deployment of support staff. These governments have also been keen to increase 'autonomy' in schools and give senior leaders and academies more powers to make local decisions. This has led to some employers misinterpreting or sometimes ignoring agreed procedures.

What is cover supervision?

Cover supervision is needed for a teacher's **short-term absence** from the classroom where the absence was not known about in advance. Pupils in these classes will carry out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision; **no active teaching** takes place. The duties of a cover supervisor can be summarised as:

- Supervising the work that has been set on the lesson plan provided, using the necessary resources that have also been provided.
- Managing the behaviour of pupils in line with the school's behaviour policy.
- Responding to any questions that pupils might have about the process.
- Dealing with any immediate problems or emergencies in line with school policy and procedures.
- Collecting any completed work at the end of the lesson and returning it to the teacher.
- Reporting back as appropriate on any issues that arose during the lesson.



Recent changes

In recent years, some employers have sought to expand what is defined by cover supervision, for instance by asking staff to do extended periods of cover or more complex work. This is not appropriate and staff should contact their union representatives if managers instruct staff to go beyond their contracted duties.

Who can undertake cover supervision?

- **Cover supervisors** – staff employed for the specific purpose of covering for absence.
- **HLTAs** – could be asked to provide cover **as a small part of their role** but it is not an appropriate use of their skills, knowledge and expertise.
- **Teaching Assistants** – provided that the TA has the necessary level of skills and training. The NJC model job profile reflects that staff providing cover supervision should have skills and knowledge at NVQ3, or equivalent.
- **Teachers** – under the terms of the ‘Rarely Cover’ agreement a teacher should only be expected to cover for an absent colleague ‘rarely’, in circumstances that a school could not have foreseen once all other options have been exhausted.

Training

It is the responsibility of the head teacher to provide a **sufficient level of training to enable a member of staff to carry out their job effectively**. Training is not an optional extra and no-one should take on duties that they feel unprepared to cope with.

Staff undertaking cover supervision should be familiar with school policies on health and safety, behaviour management, equal opportunities and special educational needs and disabilities.

Training should include:

- Induction training
- Dedicated training time throughout the academic year
- Periods of observation
- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) such as ongoing mentoring

Please search ‘cover supervisor’ at the Skills for Schools website (www.skillsforschools.org.uk) for details of training opportunities for those supervising cover.



Potential areas of concern

Are staff paid and qualified for cover supervision? UNISON sometimes hears that level 2 staff are being asked to provide cover supervision. To be asked to supervise cover for a whole class, you should be qualified to, and paid to, at least Teaching Assistant level 3.

What is meant by short-term absence? There are no guidelines on time limits for cover, only that head teachers must determine if cover supervision is appropriate. They must take into account continuity of learning, the time pupils are without a teacher and the proportion of curriculum time affected. Planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time is not short term and so should not be met by cover supervision.

When does ‘supervision’ end and ‘teaching’ begin? – Cover supervision is a level 3 activity that involves supervising pre-prepared work set by a teacher. It is different from ‘specified work’, which is a level 4 activity, and is defined as planning and preparing lessons, delivering them and reporting on pupil progress. Support staff, paid at level 4, can carry out ‘specified work’ only if it is in support of a qualified teacher who directs and supervises it.

Lack of access to training – UNISON believes it is essential that support staff are involved in, and paid to attend, relevant parts of the five development days that are compulsory for teachers, so long as they fall on a day they are contracted to work. If a training session falls on a non-work day then attendance should be optional, but must be paid if attended.

HLTA grading – In an attempt to save money, some schools have attempted to downgrade HLTAs for part of their role, i.e. they are paid at a higher rate for part of the week (when timetabled to do higher level work with a whole class) and at a lower level of pay for other parts of the week. UNISON remains opposed to this practice and promotes the National Agreement that states HLTAs should be deployed in roles that makes full use of their skills, training and responsibilities and receive pay that reflects this.

Industrial Action – UNISON members should not take on additional responsibilities on days when other trade unions, most notably the teaching unions such as the NEU or the NASUWT, have announced strike action. School support staff should not be expected to provide cover for or take classes where this would normally be done by teachers who are taking action. In particular, on strike days HLTAs and cover supervisors should only be taking classes/providing cover that fit the five criteria where they are contracted to do so.

We would not expect striking teachers to set lesson plans for strike days.

If any of these areas of concern apply to you raise it with your manager and/or contact your UNISON rep/branch for advice.



Responsibilities of schools' management

- Decisions made in how staff are deployed to cover for absent colleagues must be underpinned by the principle that is **should not negatively impact on teaching and learning for the pupils**.
- Management should **plan ahead** effectively to ensure that appropriate cover is in place, such as by analysing historic patterns of cover and considering the impact of teachers' requests for cover.
- A **clear system of supervision and support for staff** delivering cover supervision or specified work should be established.
- The school should **monitor and analyse patterns of absence**. UNISON advises that schools maintain records of cover undertaken by staff for this purpose.
- **Arrangements need to be made to cover for medium- or long-term absence** of a teacher by employing a teacher on a fixed-term contract or supply teacher.
- Schools must have **distinct and documented cover and PPA policies in place**.

Union support

All school senior leaders are required to produce a school calendar (i.e. a timetable of scheduled meetings/parents evenings etc.) to avoid unmanageable workloads at particular times in the year. All union reps should be consulted annually on the school calendar. The rep should have time off to **consult members** on this and should feel **able to raise issues** at any time of the year if time-tabled activities are not working or have become dependent on inappropriate practice.

Incidents of bad practice should be raised with your workplace UNISON rep or local branch.

Also contact your UNISON rep or branch for advice if you are being asked to supervise cover for classes and have any questions or concerns.

UNISON is the largest union for school support staff in the UK. We provide expert advice and guidance on professional issues such as administering medicines, lesson observations and managing behaviour.

We hold an annual national celebration day for school support staff called Stars in Our Schools; and we offer you support by trained representatives if you have a problem at work, legal advice and much, much more.

Join us by calling 0800 171 2193 or visit joinunison.org